Countering Dangerous Speech

What is dangerous speech?

"Dangerous speech" is speech that increases the risk for violence and atrocities against certain people because of their membership in a group. These groups can be based on ethnic, religious, or racial identities; among other characteristics. Dangerous speech includes speech that encourages its audience to accept, condone, and commit violence against people who belong to a targeted group.

Photo by John S. Quaterman

What should dangerous speech interventions do?

- Increase the willingness of audiences to speak out against efforts to foment group-targeted violence.

- Reduce the likelihood of dangerous speech being used, reduce audiences accepting and spreading the message, and reduce audiences condoning or participating in group-targeted violence.

How does dangerous speech intervention work?

Interventions should identify specific audiences, understand why they may be receptive to the message of dangerous speech, choose speakers and mediums that can reach and influence them, craft effective messages, and recognize and avoid risks. Interventions can take several forms including: awareness-raising, early warning and response, takedowns, alternative narratives that emphasize shared values, and counter narratives that undermine dangerous speech or build the capacity of influential positive voices. Here are some examples of successful dangerous speech interventions.

Kenya
The Sisi ni Amani organization in Kenya used a text messaging platform combined with face-to-face outreach and grassroots programming as a form of awareness-raising to reach more than 65,000 subscribers with messages aimed at changing behavior around violence targeting civilian groups during the 2013 elections.

Nigeria
The Interfaith Mediation Center in Northern Nigeria recruits pastors, imams, and other religious leaders to counter negative messages and events. They use community gatherings and news media to make joint statements and discuss issues. Using an early warning and response mechanism, they respond to dangerous speech and incidents in real time through a network of trained community members who monitor local events.

Middle East
The Peace Factory, a Facebook-based initiative with pages all over the region, has created opportunities for people who support peace, but come from different countries and backgrounds, to become friends on Facebook. They create a successful counter-narrative by building the capacity of positive voices.

Pakistan
Through a program called "I am Karachi," artists are taking down negative messages on public walls by painting over them with positive images uniting people based on a shared Karachi identity. Artists are physically reclaiming spaces and resetting the norms that are promoted in these public spaces.

South Sudan
The United States Institute of Peace funded a radio drama called Sawa Shabab designed to increase listeners' knowledge about violence and change their attitudes regarding conflict. The show, created in response to broadcasts of war songs and radio stories glorifying conflict, is creating an alternative narrative emphasizing shared values.

Photo by Werner Anderson